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Costa Ricans at Odds Over U.S. Army Advisers

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica, May 18 — The arrival here this month of United States military advisers to train the Costa Rican police has added to a growing debate about whether the United States is urging this country to militarize against its will.

Costa Rica has no army, and President Alberto Monge Alvarez has proclaimed that his country will maintain "perpetual unarmed neutrality."

But with Nicaragua on the northern border, neutrality has become increasingly difficult to maintain, especially since the Costa Rican economy is heavily dependent on United States aid.

At the request of the Costa Rican Government, 20 United States Army Special Forces advisers have begun to train 700 Costa Rican civil guardsmen in basic military skills. The Civil Guard is a national police force.

Nicaraguan Charge Denied

The arrival of the American trainers, who are to stay about five months, provoked public objections, a shouting match in the Costa Rican Congress and an acrimonious debate within the Government over whether the request had been a mistake.

An American television cameraman who filmed the arrival of the first nine United States advisers on May 8 said Costa Rican policemen had told him he could not show the film on Costa Rican television for fear of "inflaming the public."

In Nicaragua, Julio Ramos Argüello, the head of intelligence for the Nicaraguan Army, said in an interview this week that he believed the American advisers were setting up a new base that could be used if the United States ever invaded Nicaragua, a charge both American and Costa Rican officials denied.

A senior Costa Rican Government official said President Monge had had serious misgivings about inviting the American advisers. The Minister of Public Security, Benjamín Piza Carranza, requested they be sent, the official said. Although President Monge was unhappy with the request, the official said, he did not rescind it out of fear of straining American good will.

"The U.S. is supporting the Costa Rican economy," the official said, adding that the country, like others in the region, was "not economically viable" without United States aid. Costa Rica is to receive nearly \$200 million in loans and grants from the United States this year.

In the last few years, Costa Rica has turned down many American invitations to observe or take part in military exercises and related operations, the official said, and President Monge "can only say no to a generous friend so many times."

Although the official said the United States had never applied direct pressure, he and others said it was clear the United States wanted Costa Rica to take a more militant stand toward Nicaragua.

A senior Costa Rican security official said there was a widespread perception in the country that the United States was pressing Costa Rica to militarize, although the vast majority of Costa Ricans opposed the idea.

But a senior United States Embassy official said: "That is not a valid perception. Every single part of our assistance to Costa Rica is the result of a letter in which they asked for these things."

"Costa Rica will not be militarized," he added. "They are not proposing to change it, and neither are we."

The controversy sharpened two weeks ago when Edward P. Djerejian, a State Department spokesman, announced in Washington that 200 Costa Rican "leftists" had gone to Nicaragua to fight alongside Sandinista troops against the American-backed Nicaraguan rebels. He said "there is clearly potential for the use" of this "all-Costa

Rican brigade inside Costa Rica in the future."

Mr. Piza and other Costa Rican officials said they had little evidence to substantiate the statement. "We haven't been able to show that; we don't have any proof," Mr. Piza said.

Another senior Costa Rican official said Mr. Djerejian's statements had "inflamed" the situation and "put us in an awkward position."

As a result, Costa Rica's Security Council wrote to the United States Embassy asking for the evidence behind the charge. The embassy official said the information first came from a report in The Washington Times, adding that "the State Department confirmed it."

Evidence 'Extremely Weak'

But a senior State Department official who has read the intelligence information behind the charge said it was "extremely weak."

"They've taken everything that came out of the vacuum cleaner," he said. "It's not the sort of thing we normally go with."

Several senior Costa Rican officials, including Mr. Piza and Enrique Obregón, the head of the Rural Guard police force, said in interviews that the Costa Rican Government was con-

cerned about the threat of insurgency from Nicaragua, although the level of concern varied.

Starting in 1981, the country began accepting low-level United States military aid, including about \$10 million this year. In 1981, most of the civil and rural guardsmen were equipped with vintage bolt-action, single-shot rifles and not much else. The two forces have a combined strength of about 7,000 men.

The United States began providing new weapons and other equipment in 1982, and some guardsmen were trained at the United States-run School of the Americas in Panama. But, the senior official said, the Government did not invite American trainers to Costa Rica for fear that it would give the impression that Costa Rica, like Honduras and El Salvador, was militarizing with United States' help despite its vow of neutrality.

Many Invitations From U.S.

From 1983 until today, the senior Costa Rican official said, the United States has repeatedly invited Costa Rican security officials to observe American military maneuvers in Honduras and elsewhere and to attend regional military meetings. The United States also offered to send American National Guard engineers to northern Costa Rica to build a road near the Nicaraguan border.

To those and other invitations, "we said no, thank you very much," the official said, because accepting them might jeopardize Costa Rican neutrality.

The School of Americas in Panama closed last year, and Mr. Piza said his ministry decided to invite the American military advisers to train the guardsmen at a new camp in northwestern Costa Rica 10 miles from the Nicaraguan border.

Mr. Piza is known as a hard-liner whose views on Nicaragua more closely reflect the United States' position than do those of many other officials in the Costa Rican Government. He said he had asked for American trainers because "our men need training and we might as well get the best."

The senior Costa Rican official, who is close to President Monge, said Mr. Piza had presented the training plan to the President after it had already been arranged with the American Embassy, angering Mr. Monge. Caught between the expected negative public reaction and the desire not to irritate the United States, the official said, Mr. Monge reluctantly decided to go along with the idea, acknowledging that "we will pay a political price for this."